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ABSTRACT

The objectives of this study were: (1) to find out what elementary school students think the purpose of school is, and (2) to compare parents' and student's perceptions of the purpose of school. One hundred forty-eight first through seventh graders and sixteen parents of fourth grade children participated in the study. The first and second grade students were interviewed and all other students and parents were asked to write answers to the question "What is school for?" Among the 25 purposes listed by students "to learn" was the answer most often listed; 91% of all students chose this answer. A comparison between the purposes listed by parents and between the purposes listed by their fourth grade children revealed that while parents and students listed 12 similar purposes, students selected 22 purposes not listed by parents and parents listed 39 purposes not listed by students. Only one parent did not list "learn" as a purpose of school. (Author/MP)

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"STUDENTS THINK SCHOOLS ARE FOR LEARNING"

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What is a school for? Many attempts have been made to determine the purpose of schools.

Klein(1979) asked the parents involved in "A Study of Schooling" to rate the importance of four major goals of schooling(intellectual, social, personal, vocational). The students were asked the same questions. The parents and students were asked which of the above goals should be emphasized most at their school. Approximately 50% of the parents said the intellectual goal should be emphasized while only 33% of the students felt emphasis should be placed on intellectual goals. Klein writes that, "Since schools are asked to fulfill many goals by many different groups, it seems important for educators to know the extent to which the same or different goals are thought to be important by students, teachers, parents...". p. 246

In addressing the question of what schools are for, Goodlad(1980) points out the contradictions between what schools are expected to do, what they actually do, and what they should be doing.

Goodlad(1980a) states, "It has been said that the prime goal of schools should be to teach students: how to learn." p. 591

The 12th Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward The Public Schools(1980) indicated that 10% of the parents of public school children answered "poor curriculum/ poor standards" to the question, "What do you think are the biggest problems with which the public schools in this community must deal?" p. 34 In the poll the public

schools ranked second behind the church in the area of confidence in American institutions with 28% indicating a "great deal" of confidence. p. 35

Even though the schools ranked second in public confidence, many times this author hears, "The public schools are in trouble, they are not doing the job." If the above statement is true, and it may be true in the eyes of some citizens, what should be done to change schools so they can do the job? We could have elected officials debate and legislate for schools. We could get all the great minds in education, ie.; administrators, supervisors, directors of curriculum, teacher educators, and classroom teachers, together to map strategy for a change. We could ask the parents; afterall the pollsters do. This author feels it is time to ask the individuals the schools are for: the pupils.

Just as the ideas of elected officials, educators, parents, and the general public are important in any change, so are the ideas of the pupils. The pupils' ideas should be periodically sought because they could add important information to any investigation of curriculum and instruction.

The idea for this paper sprung from the research of Goodlad(1980) and from a survey designed by Saxe(1971). It draws on the perceptions of the pupils from one middle class public school. The author sought to find what the students think is the purpose of school. They were asked:

"What is a school for?" To extend the survey the parents of the fourth grade students were asked the same question and the answers were compared with those of the fourth grade students.

The Survey

To obtain information in as pure a form as possible the author surveyed all the pupils in the school on the same day. The first and second grade students were interviewed. All others completed written answers to the question. The students were asked the question: "What is a school for?"

The teachers agreed to cooperate and monitor the classes while they completed the essays. The author introduced the question and set the rules with the students. Three rules were used: 1. Be truthful; 2. Do not talk to other students; and 3. Do not ask the teacher any questions.

No discussion in advance was held in the classes because it was feared that the pupils would give adult appropriate answers rather than true feelings. Each essay was read by the author and every purpose given for school was tabulated.

The Results

The results for each grade were combined and are exhibited in table 1A. In all seven grades, pupils listed "to learn" more often than any other response. Does it make any difference how children see school? If you know the perceptions of the recipients of a change you may be able to design the

TABLE 1A *

WHAT IS A SCHOOL FOR?

(A Summary of Responses that 148 Pupils in one Public School
Made To The Question: "What is a School for?")

Purpose of School	Grade		B=Boy				G=Girl								Totals Number of Pupils	%
	1		2		3		4		5		6		7			
	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G		
1. Learn	7	7	14	6	13	12	10	9	7	8	14	11	10	7	135	91
2. Read	6	1	6	4	2	9	8	8	7	4	9	7	4	4	79	53
3. Math	3	0	4	2	1	2	10	6	6	5	11	3	5	4	62	41
4. Spelling	1	0	2	3	1	6	7	2	2	6	5	2	1	3	41	27
5. Writing	1	2	2	0	1	3	9	4	1	3	3	5	0	3	37	25
6. Soc. Studies	0	0	1	0	1	1	7	1	5	4	8	3	5	1	37	25
7. Fun	0	1	2	1	3	4	8	6	3	1	1	0	2	4	36	24
8. Work	1	0	7	1	0	3	4	2	3	1	1	2	0	0	25	16
9. Language	0	0	0	1	0	0	7	1	3	3	4	3	1	1	24	16
10. Get a Job	0	0	1	0	1	0	2	2	2	4	5	3	2	1	23	15
11. Science	0	0	1	0	1	1	4	2	2	2	1	2	2	1	19	12
12. Art	1	1	2	1	1	2	2	2	0	2	1	2	1	0	18	12
13. Listening	1	0	0	1	0	0	7	4	1	1	2	0	0	0	17	11
14. To Make Friends	0	0	0	0	1	2	2	2	0	1	0	0	3	4	15	10
15. Health	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	2	2	1	1	2	1	1	15	10
16. Music	1	0	1	0	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	0	14	9
17. To Teach You	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	2	3	1	1	12	8
18. Play	1	2	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	3	0	0	0	1	11	7
19. Education	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	1	4	1	10	6
20. To Be A Smart Person	0	0	0	1	2	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	3	0	9	6
21. Gym	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	2	0	1	1	1	0	8	5
22. Recess	2	0	1	0	1	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	8	5
23. Tell Time	0	0	3	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	4
24. Homework	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	1	1	6	4
25. Buy and Eat Lunch	2	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	3
Number of Pupils	9	9	14	6	13	12	12	10	8	9	15	12	11	8	148	
Number of Different Purposes Listed	28	9	29	18	19	23	26	27	26	27	23	23	22	21		

* Only purposes listed by five or more students have
been included in this table.

change in a way that it is more likely to succeed.

Parents' Ideas/Students' Ideas

In an effort to discover if the purposes pupils listed were similar to those listed by their parents the author asked the parents of the fourth grade students in the same school to answer the question: "What is a school for?" Sixteen parents responded to the survey. The parents and students listed twelve similar purposes. See table 1. the students listed twenty-two purposes not listed by parents, while the parents came up with thirty-nine purposes not listed by the students. See tables 2 and 3 respectively.

Table 1 summarizes all the purposes listed by both fourth grade students and parents. The table reveals many important things but most dramatic is the agreement between parents and students on one purpose of school far and above all others: "to learn". In fact a quick look at table 1A shows that this overwhelming listing of to learn extends from grades one to seven in the school.

It is important to note that seven of the purposes listed by students and not parents (table 2) were listed by at least 13 % of the students. Table 3 shows seven purposes listed by at least 12% of the parents and not listed by the students. In this day and age of "Back to Basics" it must be pointed out that 25% of the parents listed basics as a purpose of school. Although basics was listed at 25%, "Getting along with others.", was mentioned by 43% of the parents.

TABLE 1

What is a School for?
(Responses listed by both students and parents) Fourth Grade

Purpose of School	Students		Total	%	Parents of Students			
	Boys	Girls			Boys	Girls	Total	%
1. Learn	10	9	19	86	8	7	15	93
2. Reading	8	8	16	72	1	2	3	18
3. Math	10	6	16	72	1	1	2	12
4. Fun	8	6	14	63	2	1	3	18
5. Writing	9	4	13	59	1	2	3	18
6. Get a Job	2	2	4	18	0	2	2	12
7. Make Friends	2	2	4	18	3	1	4	25
8. Social Studies	7	1	8	36	0	1	1	6
9. Health	5	2	7	31	0	1	1	6
10. Science	4	2	6	27	0	1	1	6
11. Learn about yourself	0	1	1	4	3	0	3	18
12. Teach	0	1	1	4	3	0	3	18
Number of Students	12	10						
Number of Parents					9	7		
Total Number of Different Purposes Listed	10	12			8	10		

TABLE 2

What is a School for? (Responses listed by students only) Fourth Grade				
Purpose of School	Boys	Girls	Total	%
1. Listening	7	4	11	50
2. Spelling	7	2	9	40
3. Language	7	1	8	36
4. Work	4	2	6	27
5. Art	2	2	4	18
6. Recess	3	0	3	13
7. Tests	1	2	3	13
8. Papers	1	1	2	9
9. Music	1	1	2	9
10. Buy and Eat Lunch	2	0	2	9
11. Speech	1	1	2	9
12. Flashcards	2	0	2	9
13. Play	1	0	1	4
14. Homework	1	0	1	4
15. Gym	1	0	1	4
16. To be a smart person	1	0	1	4
17. Think	0	1	1	4
18. Playing Games	0	1	1	4
19. Taking Directions	0	1	1	4
20. Parties	0	1	1	4
21. Meet New Teachers	0	1	1	4
22. Meet New People	0	1	1	4
Number of Students	12	10		
Total Number of Different Purposes Listed	16	15		
Total Number of Responses Not Listed By Parents				22

TABLE 3

What is a School for? (Responses listed by parents only) Fourth Grade				
Purpose of School	Parents of Boys	Parents of Girls	Total	%
1. Getting along with others (interact)	4	3	7	43
2. Basics	2	2	4	25
3. Subjects	0	3	3	18
4. Responsibility	1	2	3	18
5. Experiences	2	1	3	18
6. Worth(self-esteem)	1	1	2	12
7. Books	2	0	2	12
8. Education	0	1	1	6
9. Sharing	0	1	1	6
10. To Be a Better Person	0	1	1	6
11. Caring About Others	0	1	1	6
12. Trade(Vocational)	0	1	1	6
13. Gaining Knowledge	0	1	1	6
14. Maturity-Developing the individual as a member of society	0	1	1	6
15. Developmental Goals	0	1	1	6
16. Enhances the Family	0	1	1	6
17. Enhances the Community	0	1	1	6
18. Socialization	0	1	1	6
19. Discussion	1	0	1	6
20. Projects	1	0	1	6
21. Honesty	1	0	1	6
22. Loyalty	1	0	1	6
23. Respect	1	0	1	6
24. Discipline	1	0	1	6
25. Studies	1	0	1	6
26. Producing a contributing member of society	1	0	1	6
27. Security	1	0	1	6
28. Provide Knowledge	1	0	1	6
29. Understand	1	0	1	6
30. Interpret	1	0	1	6
31. Teach Religion	1	0	1	6
32. Become Good Citizens	1	0	1	6
33. Become Good Students	1	0	1	6
34. Develop a person's talents and abilities	1	0	1	6
35. Experimenting	1	0	1	6
36. Satisfaction	1	0	1	6
37. Wonderful Place	1	0	1	6
38. Challenge	1	0	1	6
39. To Teach Us to Apply What We Have Learned	1	0	1	6
Number of Parents	9	7		
Total Number of Responses Not Listed By Students			39	

Not for Learning?

One hundred thirty-five of the one hundred forty-eight students listed "to learn" as a purpose for school. The author was interested in finding what the thirteen students that did not list learning as a purpose thought was the purpose of school. Table 4 contains a compilation of the purposes listed by the students who did not list learning. There were no surprises. The students listed responses similar to other students who had listed "to learn".

Only one of the sixteen parents of the students did not list learn. The parent's statement was: "school is a time to find new friends and to build a better self for the future."

Summary

If schools are for learning the next question to parents, students, and the general public should be: "Are the schools providing learning?" After we see the results of that question we will know if there is any truth to the statement, "The schools are in trouble. They are not doing the job."

This study should be completed on a much larger scale and across socio-economic groups.

Happy Learning!

TABLE 4

What is a School for?																	
(Responses listed by students who did not list learning)																	
Purpose of School	Grade	B=Boy				G=Girl								Total Number of Pupils	%		
		1		2		3		4		5		6				7	
		B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G			B	G
1. Reading		1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	5	38
2. Math		0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	5	38
3. Fun		0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	4	30
4. Work		1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	23
5. For People to Teach You		0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	3	23
6. Homework		1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	15
7. Listening		0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	15
8. To Get Smart		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	2	15
9. To Get a Job		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	15
10. Alphabet		1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7
11. Art		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	7
12. Buy and Eat Lunch		1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7
13. Recess		1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7
14. Ride in a School Bus		1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7
15. Libraries		1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7
16. Speech		1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7
17. Talk		1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7
18. Spelling		0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7
19. Play		0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7
20. To Get Good Grades		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	7
21. English		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	7
22. Health		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	7
23. Science		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	7
24. Social Studies		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	7
25. Music		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	7
26. Gym		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	7
27. Diplomas		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	7
28. To Pass		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	7
29. Education		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	7
30. To Do Things		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	7
31. To Make Friends		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	7
32. Write		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	7
Total Number of Pupils		2	2	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	13	
Total Number of Different (32) Responses		10	2	0	0	0	0	8	2	4	1	3	10	5	2		

* One parent of the fourth grade students did not list learning as a purpose of school. The parent's statement was:
 "School is a time to find new friends and to build a better self for the future."

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